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"Celebrating the Season of Giving"

The holiday season is upon us and I would like to extend warm wishes to everyone in North Florida to have a safe and happy holiday. This time of year can be hectic for all of us. We become so wrapped up in the frantic schedule of shopping for gifts, attending parties, and making travel preparations, we forget the true meaning and spirit of the holiday season. Especially at this time of year, it is important that we remember those in our community who are less fortunate and those, who because of illness or death in the family, are suffering or grieving instead of celebrating this joyous season.

I want to recognize those who give their time, energy, and love to make the holidays a happier time for those less fortunate and join in that effort. One group to whom I am personally indebted, are the volunteers and professional caregivers involved in hospice care.

Hospice care is a compassionate way of caring for terminally ill people. Hospice caregiving teams include physicians, nurses, therapists, home care aides, counselors and most importantly, volunteers, who help terminally ill patients and their families deal with one of the toughest transitions in life. The hospice program, primarily based in the home, treats the person, not the disease; focuses on the family, not the individual; and emphasizes the patient's quality of life. Hospice care ensures that the patient's life is as fulfilling and satisfying as possible, right up to the last moment.

Hospice care has played an important role in my life. Two years ago, I lost my father to prostate cancer. I do not know what my mother and family would have done without the care that Big Bend Hospice provided. Hospice care allowed my father to die at home in dignity, surrounded by the people who loved him. The volunteers and professionals at Big Bend not only worked to relieve my father's pain and meet his physical needs, but they also ministered to his emotional needs and spent time with my family to prepare us for the difficult road ahead. My family and I will never forget the commitment and compassion of the caregivers who helped us through this very sad time.

Volunteers play a crucial role in hospice nationwide. Of the 115,000 persons involved in hospice care in the United States, about 95,000 are volunteers, giving more than 15 million hours of their time each year. Hospice volunteers render a wide range of services for the patients such as performing household chores, providing transportation, or just being a supportive friend for the patient and the family. Hospices also require volunteer assistance in office chores and in preparations for special events. For those who lack the time to give these volunteer efforts, hospices also rely upon grants and community donations to keep their operations running. Without its volunteers and contributors, hospices would not be able to provide their unique services to North Florida's patients and their families.

During the holidays, when we celebrate all of the wonderful gifts with which we have been blessed, it is important that we look for ways to give something back to our communities. Your

local hospice is only one of hundreds of charitable organizations that desperately need your support. So today, I encourage you to embrace the holiday spirit of giving and share your time, talents, and compassion with those in need.